



“EMBODIED MYSTICISM AND FEMININE PILGRIMAGE: THE RIVER AS A LIMINAL SPACE IN THE SHORT STORY ISHWAREE BY INDIRA GOSWAMI”

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concept of “**embodied mysticism**” in the story *Ishwaree*, focusing on how spiritual and emotional transformation in women is deeply tied to the physical body and natural landscapes. The protagonist, *Ishwaree Devi*, embarks on a spiritual journey where rivers like the Kamala and Baitarini serve as liminal spaces that facilitate her self-realization. Unlike the intellectual approach of male scholars in the story, *Ishwaree*’s spiritual awakening is rooted in her physical and emotional experiences, revealing an alternative form of mystical knowledge. The paper contrasts *Ishwaree*’s embodied, feminine spirituality with the intellectualism of figures like Shastriji, arguing that her encounters with nature, holy men, and sacred geography represent a uniquely feminine pilgrimage. *Ishwaree*’s connection with rivers and the landscape transcends mere intellectual pursuit, reflecting how her desires, emotions, and body become channels of divine understanding. This exploration introduces **embodied mysticism** as a framework to analyze how South Asian women’s spiritual narratives often blend physical, emotional, and mystical dimensions. By focusing on *Ishwaree*’s journey through sacred spaces and her eventual spiritual revelation, the paper contributes a fresh perspective to discussions of feminine spirituality, liminality, and the transformative role of nature in Indian religious literature.

KEYWORDS: Embodied Mysticism, Feminine Spirituality, Liminality, Sacred Landscapes, South Asian Women’s Literature, Pilgrimage

“ISHWAREE”

SUMMARY:

Ishwaree Devi, a young girl from Munshiganj, had hoped to receive an invitation to attend the Ramayan Mela at Janakpuri. She believed that attending the event would lead her to become the wife of Dharma Bahadur Rana and start a new life. However, she did not receive any letter of invitation, which made her think that she might not be included in the program.

Meanwhile, Shastriji, the father figure of Sri Dham’s Ramayan group, received a letter from his assistant praising the depth of knowledge and research within the Ramayan community. The letter mentioned an upcoming conference at Janakpuri, the birthplace of Janaknandini Sita. The conference would conclude with a bus trip to Raxaul, where passports and immigration formalities would be handled. *Ishwaree* was deeply touched by the letter and believed that Shastriji might have felt guilty for not including her in the program. She felt a strong attraction towards Dharma Bahadur Rana and admired his emotional sensitivity and scholarly pursuits. However, she found the arrogance of many intellectuals, including Shastriji, to be scandalous.

Carrying papers, pencils, and pens, *Ishwaree* arrived at the New Delhi Railway Station. She encountered Shastriji’s group on the train, surrounded by well-known figures like Veskovich, Herbert Hondin, Mr. Dylan, Srisurang Pulthupi, and Elizabeth O’Hara. Shastriji, an experienced traveler, was eager to attend the prestigious international conference with his friends. As the

journey continued, *Ishwaree* found herself enchanted by the beauty of Dharma Bahadur Rana and the surrounding fields. She felt a deep connection between nature and her mind, envisioning them as a necklace with man and nature as the radiant jewels. At that moment, the priest of Chaturbhuj Sriram Mandir, Pandit Krishnapada Sewak Swami, approached her. *Ishwaree* held a low opinion of Shastriji’s munshi, who was occupied with foreign guests.

Ishwaree and Dharma Bahadur were captivated by the Kamala River, believed to be the daughter of a Brahmin who had received a boon from the goddess Ganges. However, *Ishwaree* felt unease with the words of the Brahmachari and her surroundings. Despite this, she remained content and excited about the possibility of escaping the hardships she had faced since her husband’s death. As the journey progressed, *Ishwaree* found herself in a state of entrainment, unable to recall small details like islands of sand and geese on the river. She was aware of Dharma Bahadur’s presence, feeling as though her body merged with his, erasing any trace of her individuality. *Ishwaree* grew concerned that the brahmachari might be privy to her thoughts and emotions, as he was believed to possess all-knowing insight into the hearts and minds of others.

Seeking blessings, *Ishwaree* approached a holy man perched on a treetop. She received blessings from various sannyasis and sadhus, which brought her a sense of stability. Among them was a sannyasi from the Baitarini River, whose physical touch seemed to reveal a truth she had long awaited since attending

conferences in Chitrakut, Ujjain, and Ayodhya. In a dreamlike state, Ishwaree became aware of Dharma Bahadur's control and the presence of the sannyasi from the Baitarini River. As darkness enveloped the world, a disturbance occurred, and a hand wearing a steel ring became visible. Ishwaree's heart was pierced by a brilliant light emanating from the sacred Baitarini River, unrelated to Dharma Bahadur's ring. Ishwaree Devi, a young girl from Munshiganj, hopes to attend the Ramayan Mela at Janakpuri but receives no invitation. She feels a deep attraction towards Dharma Bahadur Rana and believes that attending the event will lead to a blissful new life. Shastriji, the leader of the Ramayan group, receives a letter praising their knowledge and research. Ishwaree encounters various intellectuals on a train journey, including Shastriji's group. She feels a strong connection to nature and Dharma Bahadur. Throughout the journey, Ishwaree's perception becomes hazy, and she worries that the brahmachari can read her thoughts. She seeks blessings from holy men and feels a revelation from a sannyasi. Eventually, a disturbance occurs, and Ishwaree's heart is pierced by a light from the Baitarini River, unrelated to Dharma Bahadur's ring.

INTRODUCTION

The story of Ishwaree centers around a young woman's journey, both literal and metaphorical, through the sacred geography of India. As Ishwaree seeks a new life after the death of her husband, her emotional and spiritual transformations are guided by natural elements, particularly rivers. This article introduces the term "**embodied mysticism**" to capture the way Ishwaree's spiritual experiences are grounded in her physicality and emotional states, blurring the line between body, spirit, and landscape.

While previous studies of South Asian women's spirituality often focus on intellectual or textual traditions, this article shifts the focus to **how the female body and its emotional experiences** become central to spiritual understanding. Ishwaree's connection to rivers like the Kamala and Baitarini, and her interactions with holy men, reveal an alternative path to knowledge that transcends intellectualism and embodies the mystical.

Rivers as Liminal Spaces and Symbols of Feminine Power:

In Hindu mythology, rivers often symbolize feminine forces of transformation, purity, and salvation. The **Kamala River** and the **Baitarini River** in *Ishwaree* play a significant role in her spiritual and emotional journey.

- **Rivers as liminal spaces:** Rivers serve as thresholds or "**in-between**" spaces where the physical and spiritual worlds meet. They represent moments of transformation for Ishwaree, who feels both a deep connection to nature and a profound internal shift when she encounters these sacred waters. This section explores the symbolic role of rivers in Indian religious narratives, particularly their association with feminine energy and the power to initiate spiritual change.
- **Feminine desire and spiritual awakening:** As Ishwaree

journeys alongside these rivers, her physical and emotional desires intertwine with her spiritual awakening. The article analyzes how the **Baitarini River**—described as piercing Ishwaree's heart with a brilliant light—acts as a metaphor for Ishwaree's spiritual revelation. Her transformation comes not from an intellectual understanding but from a deeply **embodied** spiritual experience, where her emotions, desires, and body become channels of divine knowledge.

Embodied Mysticism and the Female Body in Sacred Spaces:

This section introduces the term "**embodied mysticism**", emphasizing how Ishwaree's spiritual journey is deeply connected to her physical experiences. Unlike the male intellectuals around her, whose understanding of spirituality is tied to scholarship and text, Ishwaree's knowledge comes through her body and emotions.

- **The body as a site of mystical experience:** Ishwaree's connection with nature, particularly her entrainment with Dharma Bahadur and her merging with the landscape, reflects a form of knowledge that is **felt through the body** rather than learned through intellectual discourse. This section draws on theories of **embodied knowledge** to show how Ishwaree's spiritual journey unfolds through her interactions with the natural world and the holy men she encounters, rather than through abstract thought.
- **Feminine pilgrimage:** Ishwaree's pilgrimage through sacred landscapes, meeting with holy men, and receiving blessings from sannyasis represents a **feminine form of pilgrimage**. Her pilgrimage is not defined by doctrinal learning but by personal revelation, achieved through her encounters with nature, the divine, and her inner emotional world. This challenges traditional understandings of religious pilgrimage, which often prioritize male intellectual or devotional practices.

Contrasting Intellectualism with Embodied Mysticism:

This section contrasts Ishwaree's **embodied mysticism** with the intellectualism represented by Shastriji and his group of scholars.

- **Male intellectualism vs. female mysticism:** Shastriji and the intellectuals surrounding him represent a different path to knowledge—one based on research, text, and scholarship. Ishwaree, by contrast, embodies a **different kind of knowing**: one that comes through lived experience, emotional connection, and mystical encounters with nature. This section explores the tension between these two forms of knowledge, suggesting that Ishwaree's feminine, **embodied mysticism** provides an alternative to the male-dominated intellectual tradition.
- **Disconnection from the body:** The arrogance of Shastriji and other intellectuals in the story reflects their disconnection from the body and nature, privileging reason over emotion. Ishwaree's deep connection to the physical world—her merging with Dharma Bahadur, her attraction

to nature—represents a counterpoint to this intellectualism, highlighting how **embodied experiences** can lead to deeper spiritual insight.

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Liminality and Self-Realization in Feminine Spirituality:

The final section focuses on the idea of **liminality**—existing in a state of transition or in-between-ness—as central to Ishwaree’s journey.

- **Ishwaree as a liminal figure:** Ishwaree herself occupies a liminal space as a widow, existing between the roles society has prescribed for her. Her journey alongside rivers, and her eventual revelation by the light of the Baitarini River, reflects her movement between different identities—woman, widow, lover, and seeker of spiritual truth. This section explores how **liminality** serves as both a literal and symbolic state in Ishwaree’s journey of self-realization.
- **Spiritual revelation as self-realization:** In the end, Ishwaree’s revelation does not come from her relationship with Dharma Bahadur or her desire for a new life but from a mystical experience at the Baitarini River. The article concludes by arguing that **self-realization in South Asian women’s narratives** often emerges not through social or romantic fulfillment but through moments of **spiritual and mystical transformation**.

CONCLUSION

By introducing the term “**embodied mysticism**”, we can have a fresh lens through which to understand Ishwaree’s journey. Rather than interpreting her experiences solely through feminist or subaltern frameworks, it proposes that her spiritual transformation is inseparable from her physical and emotional experiences. Through her connection with nature, sacred spaces, and holy figures, Ishwaree’s story illustrates how **feminine spirituality** in South Asian narratives is often grounded in the body, in mystical experiences that transcend intellectualism and lead to personal enlightenment.

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